As a public service,

THE LAUCKS FOUNDATION

from time to time calls attention to published material that might contribute toward clarification or understanding of issues affecting world peace. The accompanying reprints constitute Reprint Mailing No. 94.

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April 18, 1988

The following is quoted from Nuclear Ethics by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. (THE FREE PRESS, a Division of Macmillan Inc. New York, 1986). pp. 10-11:

"All too often moralists and strategists tend to talk past each other as though they lived in separate cultures of warriors and victims rather than fellow citizens of a democracy. The moralists formulate fine principles that seem to the strategists about as relevant to a foreign policy as a belief in the tooth fairy is to the practice of dentistry. The strategists, on the other hand, tend to live in an esoteric world of abstract calculations and a belief in a mystical religion called deterrence, which is invoked to justify whatever is convenient. Strategists would do well to realize that there are no experts, only specialists, on the subject of nuclear war, and to listen more carefully to the moralists' criticisms. At the same time philosophers and moralists would do well to pay more heed to the strategists' arguments and to realize that they will need to work with more realistic assumptions if they wish to be effective in a dialogue between ethics and strategy."

NOTEBOOK

Spoils of war

By Lewis H. Lapham

But what good came of it at last?
Quoth little Peterkin.
Why, that I cannot tell, said he,
But 'twas a famous victory.

—Robert Southey,
"The Battle of Blenheim"

For the better part of forty years I have been listening to people talk about the chance of war with the Soviet Union, but I have yet to hear anybody say anything about what might be gained from such a war. What would be its objectives, and what spoils would belong to the victor?

The ancient Romans at least had it in mind to loot the tents of their enemies. Their legions marched east and south in the hope of stealing somebody else's grain or elephants or gold. The British empire in the eighteenth century employed its armies to protect its trade in molasses or slaves or tea. Napoleon sacked Europe in the early years of the nineteenth century to pay off the debts of the French Revolution.

But what profit could the United States or the Soviet Union discover in the other's defeat? Suppose that both nations avoided the stupidity of nuclear self-annihilation. Suppose further that one of the two nations managed to win World War III—either by means of conventional arms (Soviet tanks rolling unhindered across the plain of northern Europe or American troops marching triumphantly north from the Black Sea) or because one of the two nations simply got tired of paying the bills for next year's collection of new weapons. On the American side, the second eventuality assumes that during one of Senator Jesse Helms's brief absences from Washington a consortium of frightened liberal politicians surrendered the United States without firing so much as a single naval salute.

Say, for whatever reason, that the war ends in a flutter of parades and that a chorus of new voices, slightly accented, begins telling the story of the evening news. What then? Who distributes the prize money, and how does the conquering host preserve the innocence of its ideological faith?

Consider first the consequences of a Soviet triumph. Imagine a Soviet fleet at anchor in New York harbor and the White House occupied by the proconsuls of the Soviet empire. Among the official classes of Washington the transition probably could be accomplished in a matter of days. Certainly the federal bureaucracy would welcome the expansion of its powers and dominions. Because so much of the nation's nominally private industry feeds—even now, at the zenith of the conservative ascendancy—on the milk of government charity, none of the city's accomplished lobbyists would have any trouble grasping the principles of socialist enterprise.

The directives handed down by the Politburo presumably would do little more than magnify the frown of paranoid suspicion already implicit in the Reagan administration's insistence on loyalty oaths, electronic surveillance, urine testing, and censorship. In return for the trifling gestures that accompany any change of political venue—replacing the portraits on the walls, learning a few words of a new flattery—the government ministries would receive the gifts of suzerainty over the whole disorderly mess of American democracy. After so many years of writing so many querulous memoranda and bearing the insults of so many ungrateful journalists, the government would be free at last—free to meddle in everybody's business, free to indulge its passion for rules and its habit of sloth, free to tap all the telephones in all the discotheques in west Los Angeles.

The intellectual classes would go even more quietly into the totalitarian night. The American intelligentsia never has been notable for its courage or the tenacity of its convictions. If the Soviets took the trouble to shoot three or four television anchormen, the rest of the class would quickly learn the difference between a right and a wrong answer. The big media inevitably applaud the wisdom in office (whether announced by Gerald Ford or Jimmy Carter) and the universities teach the great American lesson of going along to get along. Many of the most vehement apostles of the Reagan revolution (among them Norman Podhoretz and Michael Novak) once professed themselves loyal to the liberal, even the radical, left. Given their talent for conversion I expect that they wouldn't have much trouble working out the dialectics of a safe return to the winning side. Literary bureaucrats—in the United States as in the Soviet Union and whether construed as priests or commissars or English

professors—prefer the kind of world in which words take precedence over things and statements of theory overrule the insolence of facts.

Nor would the monied classes offer much of an objection to a Soviet victory. The financial magnates who weren't traveling in Europe at the time and who even bothered to notice that the war had come and gone almost certainly would make some sort of deal with the new owners of the American franchise. Over the last seven years Americans have sold off (to the Japanese, the French, the British, the Saudis) one trillion dollars in assets (land, bank debt, manufacturing capacity, real estate, office buildings), and we have gotten into the habit of deferring to the whims of a foreign buyer.

Again, as with the unoffending anchormen, the Soviets might make a halfhearted show of ideological seriousness. The Communist state certainly would confiscate a fair number of yachts and racing stables, and it might subject a few conspicuous slumlords and investment bankers to the formalities of a trial for crimes against the working poor. But too zealous a schedule of punishments would violate the spirit of *glasnost*, and I expect that most of the native oligarchy would be allowed to keep as much of its property as it could decently hide.

People might have to reduce their standards of extravagance and forgo the comfort of the fourth Mercedes or the convenience of a choice between forty-seven Italian white wines, but within a matter of weeks the opulent magazines would reflect the craze for wood carvings, caftans, and oriental colors. The fashionable people in New York and Los Angeles soon would discover a remarkable similarity between the Marxist aesthetic ("so simple, so pure") and the Puritan charm of seventeenth century New England. Henry Kissinger could be relied upon to teach the television audience about the greatness of Peter the Great.

So far, so good, but not quite good enough. Among the privileged classes in the larger cities the Soviets might discover a crowd of new and eager friends, but in the *terra incognita* beyond the lights of New York, Washington, and Beverly Hills, I'm afraid that they wouldn't have such an easy time of it. The country is too big, and too many citizens like to carry guns. The Russians have trouble enough with the illiterate and poorly armed Afghans. What would they do with the subscribers to *Soldier of Fortune* magazine, with hundreds of thousands of restless adolescents looking for a reason (any reason) to dynamite a train, with bands of guerrillas trained at M.I.T. and capable of reading the instruction manuals for automatic weapons, with the regiments of elderly duck-hunters in Florida and Texas who have been waiting patiently ever since 1945 for the chance to blast the Communist birds of prey? Lacking the sophistication of the New York police, how could the Soviets contain a crowd at a Bruce Springsteen concert, or suppress the computer networking in the San Fernando Valley? Where would the Politburo recruit the army of censors necessary to silence all the CB radios, raid all the pornographic newsstands, shut down all the telephone lines, and foreclose all the means of free and seditious expression?

Even with the enthusiastic help of Pat Robertson and William Bennett, the secretary of education, it is unlikely that the Soviet Union could accomplish so herculean a labor of purification. But unless the Russians operated the United States as a labor camp, how could they preserve the belief in the Marxist fairy tale? Let too many Russians loose in the streets of Orlando or Kansas City and they might succumb to the heresy of supermarkets or fall into the temptation of department stores. Within a generation Communism would be as dead as the last czar.

Nor would the Americans fare much better if we were unlucky enough to win the war. We are a people who lack both the talent and stomach for empire. Shooting partisans on sight doesn't sit well with what remains of the American conscience, and we complain bitterly (Mr. Reagan's Orange County friends foremost among the complainants) about the cost of keeping a military garrison in a terrain as comfortable as western Europe. Where would we find the troops to stand guard on the marches of Uzbekistan? How could we administer the 8,649,000 square miles of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics? We can't provide enough of our own citizens with decent housing, fair employment, or a fifth-grade education. What empty political promises could George Bush or Michael Dukakis offer 283,520,000 people speaking 130 languages who expect to be fed and clothed by the state? Do we imagine that we can staff Siberia with graduates of the Harvard Business School, that we can teach the hard lessons of independence to a people used to the comforts of despotism?

If we cannot do for the vast expanse of the Soviet Union what we cannot do for downtown Detroit, then either we operate the country as a penal institution or, as with Germany and Japan in the aftermath of World War II, we lend money, provide technical assistance, and instruct our wards in the perfections of capitalism. By choosing the first option we transform the American republic into a police state. The second option probably dooms America to economic ruin. To our sorrow we have seen what wonders can be worked by people released from the sterile task of making the toys of war. Within a generation we would be importing Russian cars, wearing Russian silk, borrowing Russian currency to finance the miraculous debt incurred by our military triumph.

No, I'm afraid that World War III lacks the motive of enlightened self-interest. No matter whose troops march through which capital city, the conquerors become the conquered, their systems of political and economic thought changed into their dreaded opposites.

The certain defeat implicit in anybody's victory seems to me worth bearing firmly in mind. Yet, in all the official gabbling about missiles and tanks and the fierce portrait of "American credibility" in the Persian Gulf, I never hear anybody asking the questions "Why?" and "What for?" Maybe this is because the answers would sound like nightclub jokes. ■

(Reprinted from Nuclear Times March/April 1988, pp. 22, 23, 31, by permission of the author and of the editor)

War Play

Every weekend thousands are donning camouflage fatigues and heading for the woods to shoot at each other in make-believe battles.

BY HOWARD KOHN

The Virginia woodland an hour southwest of Washington, D.C., is so hilly, bouldered and densely thicketed that the best way to find the enemy is to be still and listen. Kneeling in the shadow of a looming gray rock, I heard two men approaching from opposite directions. I knew the man behind me was on my side, moving up to give me support.

I concentrated on the crunching of leaves in front of me, 40, 30, 20 feet away. I held my breath. Suddenly, the man behind me fired a shot; a spray from the gunfire spattered off the rock and into my face.

Running for cover, I waved him off, yelling "friend." Then I saw, too late, his red armband. The enemy! I was trapped!

Miraculously, all his shots missed. I hid behind another rock and felt the relief of one granted new life. It was freezing, but sweat ran under my fatigues.

War game correspondent Howard Kohn in the trenches.

Afterwards I felt I should be ashamed for having had such a thrill. I had found playing war to be exhilarating, yet I consider myself to be a peace advocate. Was I not mocking myself and my hope for world peace if I enjoyed the making of war, make-believe though it may be?

Over the last few years, thousands of American adults have been playing games that involve shooting other people, not unlike the objective of real soldiers in real combat. Some social scientists warn that such war play may desensitize us to the real thing. These games, some say, can teach a love of war.

But the converse may be closer to the truth. The lesson from these games may be not that players will learn to love war, but that there is something about war already loved too much by too many of us.

Sandlot War. "It's a sport—the same as softball," is a description much repeated by players of the game. In fact, the war games that are now in vogue are based not on team sports, but on two widely popular children's games, capture the flag and tag [see sidebar, page 31].

In the capture-the-flag version, two teams of players dressed in camouflage fatigues with faces smeared green and brown shoot paint-filled plastic pellets at each other while trying to steal the other team's flag. It is played outdoors in all types of weather. In the game based on tag, players wear bull's-eye targets on their chests and shoot guns that fire a laser-like light. An accurate shot triggers a beeping noise. The game is designed for indoor and outdoor play.

Both games are popular in every region of the country and among all economic classes. Adults of all ages play, although the typical age is about 30. Surprisingly, a noteworthy number of women play, and the

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Are war game enthusiasts refighting the Vietnam War?

political views of the players are not predictable. Late at night last summer on Embassy Row in Washington, a pedestrian who thought she was under attack by gun-waving thieves discovered they instead were environmentalists playing Laser Tag.

The games have taken on aspects of organized sports. Since 1984, better players of the capture-the-flag version have been competing on teams in regional playoffs and a national tournament in New Hampshire. Some teams even have company sponsors, as in organized softball. But typical team names—the Brain-Dead Mercenaries, the Land Sharks and the Faces of Death—evoke the more casual sandlot softball and a sense of black humor.

Playing at war *is* fun, as games usually are, and unlike many organized sports, it poses little risk of injury. As Doug Evans, who runs the Great American Commando Club in Northern Virginia, says, "It's not a violent sport. It's not hockey. We don't go around and highstick people and knock their teeth out .... We're not carrying people off in stretchers."

But playing at war is at once more titillating and more disturbing than other games because players use a gun to shoot another person—the fundamental act of war.

Above: The flag. Left: Players practice their shooting before the game starts.

The Killer Instinct? Dr. Philip Zimbardo a Stanford University social psychologist known for his experiments in which subjects played the roles of prison guards and inmates, denounced war games in a debate on ABC's *Nightline* last September. Faced off with "Doc" James, a war-game operator in the Chicago area, Zimbardo said, "The Army prepares me to go to war by playing games exactly like yours, with fake bullets, with tracer bullets, and that's how we prepare them to be killers. So they call it war games. Calling it a game does not change the content of the game, which means the purpose is to execute—to kill—another member of the human race. Even if it's simulated, that's the purpose, to conquer and kill."

Of the 15 players I met and interviewed, every one scoffed at this idea. Doug Evans said he has yet to see anyone exhibit behavior that hinted at blood lust. Jim Albert, a computer programmer who played opposite me, apologized for shooting near my face. Over a few beers I heard a run of stories, but none reminded me of Robert Duvall and his obsession with body counts in *Apocalypse Now*. Rob Peters, a Washington environmentalist who applied for conscientious-objector status during the Vietnam War, said that after playing the tag game more than 70 times and shooting hundreds of opponents he has not once had the sensation of a kill. "Not remotely," he emphasized. Tim Halliday, another player, told me, "Maybe it's disingenuous, but I don't think I could ever actually kill anyone. If I had to go to war, I might never pull the trigger."

Killing is what repels many of us from war. When Americans have gone to the front lines, it has not automatically followed that they develop an eagerness, or even a willingness, to kill. Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall's famous study of U.S. infantrymen in World War II found that no more than 25 percent—and often as few as 15 percent—ever fired their guns when fired upon.

William Broyles, an Army lieutenant in Vietnam and former editor of *Newsweek*, describes himself as a nonviolent person who has not been in a fistfight since elementary school. Broyles, too, had moral qualms before accepting his commission in Vietnam. Once there, though, he began to savor the tension and the strategy. In a controversial article published in *Esquire* in 1984, he wrote, "War is a brutal deadly game, but a game, the best there is. And men love games."

If such a conclusion seems monstrous on first reading, it seems less so after playing a war game. The more a war game approximates real war—with the single exception of bloodshed—the more appealing it is to many players. Mud, sandpapery brush, insects, extreme temperatures and overall discomfort all seem to add to the enjoyment. As a rule, the more demanding the games are in terms of stamina, athletic coordination, reflexes, strategy and sacrifice,

(Continued on page 31)

A war game "casualty": He may be a hero, but in a real war he would have been dead.

GAME/Continued from page 23

the more players like them.

I felt, after playing, that a war game has the same basic psychological pull as softball, football or basketball, but at a heightened intensity. There is the chance for personal heroics; there is the test of nerve and skill; there is the thrill of action. Several players told me, in words to this effect: "I feel so alive when I play. Exhilarated. Nothing can top it."

Those pulls are present in real war, too. For Broyles, Vietnam was an experience shot through with adrenaline. Playing at war clearly is not the same as going to war. But the games do bring on the acute high of the instinctive fight-flight reaction.

Vietnam Revisited. D. Keith Mano, a wargame enthusiast and writer for the *National Review*, has tried to make the connection between the popularity of war games and the lost opportunities of the Vietnam War, suggesting that the game can be a weekend ticket to the war we chose to miss or were too young to fight: "The game is a retrospective stab at understanding—in mud, in sweat, in person—what was meant by Vietnam."

Did those of us who did not go to Vietnam miss out on an experience we secretly wish had been ours? Christopher Buckley, a journalist and former Reagan administration speechwriter, evaded the Vietnam draft with a medical excuse and, years later, wrote that he was filled with envy of those who had gone. Perhaps by staying home, he wrote, "we forfeited what might have been the ultimate opportunity."

None of the players I interviewed made this connection, not directly anyway, but several said they gladly would have volunteered for the 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada, which, they also said, was a far better illustration than Vietnam or even World War II of a "good" war. They recommended that I see the movie, *Heartbreak Ridge*, in which Clint Eastwood plays a Marine old-timer who served in Korea and Vietnam and is told his scorecard reads, "0-1-1" (no victories, one tie in Korea, and one defeat in Vietnam). Months shy of retirement he is sent to Grenada. In the film's final scene, as a parade band strikes up, he congratulates himself, "I'm 1-1-1."

Hero in a Box. No doubt that, compared with the drawn-out violence of the Vietnam War, the quicksilver invasion of Grenada did have the feel of a game for some of its American participants. But it is when war is seen up close and over long periods of time that its horrors begin to shift the balance away from fun and glory. "I miss [war] because I loved it," Broyles wrote, *but* "I've seen enough of war to know that I never want to fight again, and that I would do everything in my power to keep my son from fighting."

The anguish of real war is known to everyone who has seen death. Yet, after centuries of wars brought home to soldier and civilian alike, we still fight them.

In one war game, I finished gloriously: outnumbered and caught out of position, I walked brazenly into the open. I fired one shot after another and drew the enemy fire. Two of my teammates worked their way cannily around the shooting and seized the flag. We won, and I was the hero. But in a real war, I was also dead. □

How to Play

Anyone who has ever played capture the flag or tag will recognize the two basic war games currently played by adults.

In the game based on capture the flag, two teams of players attempt to be the first to seize a piece of cloth on neutral ground and carry it through enemy lines to an agreed-upon location. Expulsion from the game comes when a plastic bullet filled with paint—usually red—hits and breaks on a player, simulating a fatal wound. Serious injuries are rare, but getting hit can raise welts and hurts enough to encourage caution in the next game. Goggles are recommended and often mandatory.

The game is played outdoors on bounded fields with the natural cover of woodlands, mountains, or swamps or with fortifications of wood, metal or plastic. A single game can take from 20 minutes to two or three hours. In the wild, players often dress in camouflage fatigues and paint their cheeks, foreheads and hands green and brown. Weapons look like .45 caliber pistols or sawed-off automatic rifles, but use carbon dioxide cartridges to fire the pellets.

Charles Gaines, author of *Pumping Iron*, and a group of friends are credited with originating the game in 1976. Today there are an estimated 500 game operators who, for one-day fees of $20 to $40, supply both equipment and a playing field.

The tag-based game is simpler and can be played in cities, inside as well as outdoors. Players shoot guns that fire a laser-like light at bull's-eye targets on their chests, activating a beep.

Several toy manufacturers sell kits with guns and targets, of which the best known is probably Laser Tag. Most of the guns are futuristic, but others bear a strong resemblance to real weapons.

The tag game is faster paced and usually shorter in duration than capture the flag. It poses almost no physical risk to the players, except, as happened last summer in California, when the light-firing guns are mistaken for the real thing; in that case, a Los Angeles police officer accidentally killed a young player on the street. Since then Los Angeles and several nearby cities have banned the sale of replica toy weapons [see "War on War Toys Heats Up," *Nuclear Times* Jan./Feb. 1988]. —*H.K.*

(Reprinted from SANE/FREEZE Spring 1988
Vol. 27 No. 1, p. 9)

SANE'S 30TH. SANE founder Norman Cousins receives a specially commissioned caricature (by *US News* cartoonist Patty Cullen Clarke) from FREEZE founder Randall Forsberg. (Photo by Miller Photography.)

COUSINS: OBSTACLES TO A PEACEFUL WORLD

The following is an excerpt from remarks delivered by SANE founder Norman Cousins at the SANE 30th Anniversary Gala in New York City, December 8, 1987:

I would like to tell you about the Maine farmer who was milking a cow and while thus engaged, he was approached by a stranger who asked for the time. "I'll be glad to tell you the time," said the farmer. He bent low towards the cow, looked up, pushed the milk bag to one side, turned around and said to the stranger, "It is exactly twenty minutes to eleven." And the stranger said, "You wouldn't be pulling my leg, would you?" "Not at all," said the farmer. "Come around and see for yourself." And so the stranger came around the fence, the farmer got off the stool - "Please sit down" - which he did. "Lean towards the cow," which he did. "Bend low under the cow," which he did. "Look up," which he did. "Push the milk bag to one side," which he did. "Now," he said, "In the distance, you can see the clock tower."

The scientific principle that emerges from this little parable is that great truths are often obscured behind improbable obstacles. And the improbable obstacle, in our case, in our time, is the fact that not enough people believe that peace is possible. They can't see far enough into the distance to see the clock tower so they think there is no time and no possibility. But the peace is out there, and the peace will be achieved only as we see it and grasp it.

There's some fundamental principles concerned with the making of peace. The first is that this world and everything in it belongs to the people who inhabit it. The second, that the energy for abolishing war will come not from governments but from people. And third, that there are leaders who, whatever we may think of their past, are courageous, and can be moved in the right direction, and can lead but can not lead unless they have the specific support necessary to carry the day with the rest of the country.

And so, today we rededicate ourselves. We come here for the purpose of recognizing that the experience of thirty years ago and our experience since represent our warrant for going forward. There are many victories that lie ahead. Not just the intermediate missiles but the long-range missiles, the ICBM's, have to be dismantled and put away.

We also have to recognize that the world is a lot larger than the United States and the Soviet Union. These two countries tend to be fascinated with one another. We tend to forget that there is a large world out there and it's not just what we do with each other and to each other that will make the peace, but the kind of ideas that we hold up before the rest of the world so that the rest of the world can join with us supporting them, that will represent the difference in peace.

These are big jobs for peace, but they are jobs that can be done in our lifetime. I can think of no greater privilege than the privilege that you have in continuing to work for that cause. It's a winning cause. It's an achievable cause. And I congratulate you for being on the winning side.

(Reprinted from Utne Reader March/April 1988, pp.86-87
by permission of the editor and of the author)

Activism in everyday life

The latter half of the 20th century is a time of considerable strain and worry. We are continually exposed to information about possible wars, poisons in our air and food, the alarming decline of species diversity, the loss of individual freedoms around the world, and any number of other modern terrors. Each of us must deal with all of this complex and unpleasant information in the midst of busy lives. But it is all so overwhelming, it is often difficult to know what to do.

Most of us do nothing.

Citizen activism declined through the 1970s and into the early '80s, due in part to the bewildering assault of social and environmental problems we must try to sort out, and in part to the high cost of admission: I believe a great many people are *concerned* about various problems but do not feel inclined to take major action by sitting down on railroad tracks, attending city council meetings, or inflicting an entirely new lifestyle on themselves and their families. So the question arises, how can we change things about our society without making radical alterations in our lifestyles? How can we integrate modest, low-key activism into our daily lives?

A story from the past may illustrate this point.

In 1970 my family joined a food co-op. Named the Ecology Food Co-op, it was housed in a church basement, downstairs from our co-op day-care center. The families who made up the membership were required to work a certain number of hours each week to sustain the enterprise.

On our first "work day," we arrived with our toddler late in the day to join another couple with a young child in sweeping and scrubbing the co-op. Coming after our regular work day, the extra hours of labor in the damp basement seemed to be a kind of punishment.

After we were done, instead of driving home to an organic and nutritious supper, we decided to haul our cranky toddler to a local fast-food joint for hamburgers and fries: Our work for the Ecology Food Co-op had made us too tired, too late, and too discouraged to go home and soak our black beans. Instead we went out and bought greasy but supremely convenient dinners.

As we sat down, we discovered the other couple from our work crew wolfing down their own junk food. Everyone ate the meal in silence, staring at our plastic trays, humiliated at being discovered *en flagrante delicto* in mutual ecological sin.

For there to be significant changes made in democratic society, there usually needs to be a fairly large number of people who are working for that change. The higher the barriers are to becoming active, the fewer people there will be to get involved.

We soon dropped out of the Ecology Food Co-op, largely due to my stubborn refusal to work all day and chug home on the crowded commuter train in order to perform menial tasks in a damp church basement for the privilege of purchasing large sacks of odd-tasting grains and wrinkled organic tomatoes.

For political and social action to become broad-based rather than just the territory of "professional activists," the price of admission should be low enough to include as many of us as possible. We should each be able to do small things in our daily lives that we know will work toward changing the world.

With the new era of activism that is finally beginning to well up, we should learn from our experiences in the past. Those people who will dedicate their entire lives to making changes in society deserve our respect and our thanks. But we can also pay attention to those who care, but whose family responsibilities, economic conditions, or other factors make them unable to single-mindedly devote their lives to activism.

Nature achieves phenomenal changes not by a small number of drastic changes but by a great number of tiny changes applied over time. Eventually, nature patiently builds a person from the genes of a plankton, a soft beach from quartz boulders, a star from grains of dust. This is a good model for us to remember as we rush to find "the answer" that will

change the world overnight.

For example, one issue I have been very concerned about recently is the dramatic decline in the number of species on our planet—the reduction in the size of our gene pool. Diversity in nature is a prerequisite to survival. One example of this problem is that while there are scores and perhaps hundreds of species of chickens, 95 percent of the people in the United States get their eggs from one kind of chicken. If a disease appeared to which that particular strain of bird had no resistance, we would be out of eggs overnight. And those egg-laying chickens are raised by just nine huge chicken producers, so the chances of such a catastrophe are real: All our eggs are literally in one (genetic) basket.

I've been thinking of things that people could do about this problem of declining genetic diversity without quitting their jobs to hold 24-hour-a-day vigils outside chicken farms. Because every one of us eats, we all come into immediate contact with the problem. Consequently each of us can do something about it in the normal, natural course of our daily lives. This is true as well for many other issues on which we can make a difference in small ways, including obvious things like lessening air pollution by walking to work or combatting pesticide pollution by growing your own vegetables.

The problem of a declining egg gene pool, for instance, can be addressed simply by buying brown eggs. Inside the shell white and brown eggs are the same—the only difference is in packaging. If a fair number of people make that small adjustment in their lives, buying brown eggs, they will drastically alter the gene pool since the White Leghorn hens that produce most of our eggs just cannot lay anything but white eggs; we will have created a new market that justifies farmers keeping another breed to produce brown eggs. Then at least we'll have two major breeds of chickens producing eggs in this country instead of one. That's not a huge change in the gene pool or in the world, but would you rather sail on a ship with one lifeboat or two?

There's more to social activism than placards and protests.

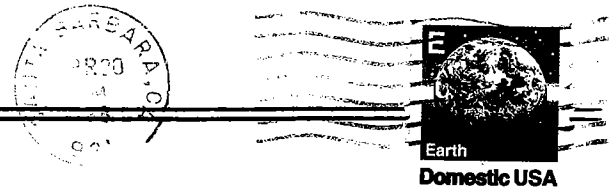
PHOTO BY JOHN R. DANICIC

This is just one small example that illustrates how significant acts can be done simply and easily by any person.

The few brave activists who risk everything to point the way, whether the Berrigans in the '60s or Brian Willson in the '80s, deserve our attention and our respect. But there is much that ordinary people, in the natural course of their everyday lives, can do to have an effect on the world's problems. What is needed is some creativity and some recognition of the power of modest action. What will result, as greater and greater numbers of people begin to take gentle action, is the deep and lasting change in our world that we activists of the '60s hoped for but have not yet achieved.

—Marty Teitel
Special to the Utne Reader

Marty Teitel is executive director of the CS Fund in Freestone, California.



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